



Review of *Building the Urban Environment: Visions of the Organic City in the United States, Europe, and Latin America*

Harold L. Platt. *Building the Urban Environment: Visions of the Organic City in the United States, Europe, and Latin America.* 2015. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press. 301 pages, ISBN 978-1-4399-1237-9 Paper (\$30.95).

Harold L. Platt's new book might remind some readers of Marshall Berman's masterpiece *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*. Drawing on a number of case studies, both authors substantiate the postmodern thesis that the limits of urban modernization lie in a lack of realistic vision by ideological modern planners and policymakers whose actions generated the forthcoming socio-ecological crises. However, unlike Berman's work, Platt's book deals with not three but seven case studies, namely the cities of Los Angeles, Chicago, London, Paris, Rotterdam, Mexico City and Sao Paulo. Each of these analyses draws on good evidence, but they are not all equally realized, much less intertwined, in a way that produces a coherent urban historical narrative.

Chicago, where spatial exclusion aggravates the countrywide problems of racial segregation (an 'urban model' that has been widely reproduced across Latin American cities, although the book does not say this). London, a city that was rebuilt after mass destruction during the Second World War, remade by an extreme modernist ideology to build its green belt, famous inner city council estates, and some of the city's radically modernist suburban enclaves. Paris, the city of the *flâneurs*, *banlieues*, and *grand ensembles*. Rotterdam, where sophisticated planning (as a discipline) counterbalances laissez-faire capitalism with social rights. Mexico City and Sao Paulo, the two examples from the global South – hailing from the most powerful economies in



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Latin America – quite unsurprisingly depicted as the places where modernizing planning and policy making clashes with corruption, extreme social inequality, and, as Platt rightly recalls, the malaise of ‘modernism without modernization’ that has nurtured today’s monster megalopolises.

And finally Los Angeles, the colossal city about which Platt reflects at greater length, probably because it is the one he knows best: a massive hydro-ecologic failure, yet still a relatively stable urban environment, thanks both to the power of its promoters to supply water at the expense of drying its whole surrounding territory, and to the enormous amounts of state control and violence exerted in the city. Los Angeles, the case where racial and class contestation arose in the most violent fashion in the post-modern United States of the 1990s. This city, as Platt concludes at the very end of the book, represents all seven cases ‘collapsed down to this one,’ basically evoking – yet not fairly acknowledging – the Los Angeles School’s Model.

While this book is a tremendous source of knowledge, one is nevertheless unsure what is to be taken from the conclusion that Los Angeles somehow embodies key elements of the other six cities. Can all the other cases really be represented in the single city of L.A.? For what purpose? The author never adequately explains or elaborates this final claim, undermining the otherwise high quality of the book. Neither does he justify why these seven (and not other) cities are chosen for study. Though the probable logic behind his case selection is Platt’s extensive knowledge about these seven cities, in some cases the narrative is more anecdotal than in others. Sections on early 20th century planning in London and Rotterdam masterfully deliver relevant descriptions, yet the portrayal of the events of 1968 in Mexico City and Paris are inaccurately portrayed as if these epitomized urban-related conflicts, especially social reactions against top-down planning bureaucracies. In fact, the causes of these and other uprisings in the late 1960s were deeper and more complex, related to the exhaustion of welfare regimes, lack of democracy and the advent of more aggressive laissez faire capitalism, not problems caused mainly by failing city planning.

Instead of writing whole chapters devoted to each of his cases, Platt deals with an historical hypothesis, phase by phase, jumping from one case to the other. In my view, the former approach could have delivered a simpler, more readable, and less predictable text. These phases, as treated in the book, are: first, the far too optimistic pre-war modern urban conceptions; second, the radical and violent advent of modernist thinking in all spheres of the state and private sector in the post-War period; and third, the different layers of postmodern deconstruction: an ample array of alternative proposals to overcome the failures of the modernist rationale, ranging from radical social movements to more peaceful, but still tremendously normative, technical eco-planning. These ideas have been present in the urbanism literature for a long time, but Platt brings them into a fresh and extremely detailed historical discussion.

At any rate, this book is not, and never aims to be, a comparative analysis, despite dealing with seven radically diverse urban realities. Readers will find almost no comparative perspective on these cities, which might have given the book a higher theoretical value, though it would also have demanded deeper understanding of each cultural-socio-political context. With the exception of the end of the first section, other parts of the book conclude with additional details of the cases, rather than a summation of the complex data already provided. Platt seldom delivers general ideas to help readers digest the extensive information given for each of the cases. The final concluding chapter is probably the only truly disappointing part of the book. It focuses on a single case, Los Angeles, and though he claims L.A. represents the other cases in collapsed form, references to the other cities disappear.

Something similar happens at a theoretical level. Platt is a resourceful author and knows well an ample array of scholars and theories, yet for the most part, he draws from a theoretical corpus that – with very few exceptions – revolves around scholars in the global North, mostly those based in the United States. Consequently, one might assume that Platt’s own understanding of urban planning, very much like the most conspicuous modern thinkers he criticizes, is a discipline that *travels* from center to periphery, a discipline that educates and controls the uneducated and chaotic.

Marshal Berman’s book achieves something this book does not: the treatment of urban space in a very particular *Lefebvrian* sense, meaning the city is not only the setting of modernization, but also a resource for it, and its primary reason to exist. St Petersburg in 19th century Tsarist Russia is a place reengineered for socio-political aims, Haussmann’s Paris is the first coordinated mega-scale modern real estate operation, Robert Moses’ New York is the unstoppable machine of top-down technological spatial segregation. Berman’s Marxism was surely heterodox because he did not just see state power exerted to control class confrontation and promote private accumulation; his narrative is full of complexities, contradictions, and counterintuitive findings. At the end, one never knows whether Berman’s masterpiece was about the destructive power of capital or the grandiosity of modern capitalist planning technology—a question I suspect Platt’s book also sought to address, but only partially engaged. For Platt, in contrast, urban space more often appears as a mere setting for modernization. Narratives on class conflict are almost absent from this text (with the exception of some bits when he talks about Mexico City’s or Sao Paulo’s enormous social inequalities, yet those were not *urban* conflicts *per se*).

Platt uses the term *organic* as a reference to the many socio-technical and environmental contradictions that urban modernization presents. This term is a sort of *démodé* construct brought back to life by this book. However, as the author clearly explains, organic has been a buzzword

used by too many people to depict too many things, from the most top-down functionalist designs by modernist architects to the laissez-faire chaotic informal urban environments produced on the fringes of modern societies, namely the borders of the global North and West. For Platt, Le Corbusier's Radiant City was organic, Howard's Garden City was organic, Barragan's affluent suburban Los Jardines del Pedregal in Mexico City was organic, Costa's Brasilia was organic, etc. So, is everything organic? Platt criticizes the unelaborated use of this term by modernist planners as alibies for achieving almost everything, but, by the end of his book, the term provides so little explanatory value and is so seldom theoretically elaborated, that some readers might even wonder why organic is included in the subtitle.

Still Platt's work is exhaustive and accurate (I only found a few toponymies incorrectly spelled, like Tepito or Paseo de la Reforma, both in Mexico). It is an extremely informative palimpsest of detailed historical information, a must read for anyone interested in the topics of 20th century planning and its inability to cope with the unsurmountable chaos of the modern and postmodern city. I think non-specialized readers and students should be especially interested in this book.

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